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Marked Membership: Anthropological Perspectives on North American Contemporary Tattooing

Rosalie A. Johnson
University of Central Florida

MARKED MEMBERSHIP: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON NORTH AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY TATTOOING

by

ROSALIE JOHNSON

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ABSTRACT

Tattooing has persisted across time and space, often developing across ancient civilizations, even before cross-cultural contact. With the current oldest verified tattoos on the mummified body of Ötzi, the 5,300-year-old Tyrolean Iceman, up to current-day tattooing, a variety of uses and meanings have been ascribed to the practice. A majority of anthropological research has been dedicated towards indigenous tattooing traditions, external perceptions of marked individuals, and tattooing's deviant associations. Only a marginal amount of work has been geared towards the internal perceptions and cultural structuring of tattoos within modern societies, especially in the West. Frequently, a 'tattoo community' is assumed in both daily conversation and academic publications. Yet surprisingly, the small amount of research that sets out to test for the possibility of a unique community structured around tattoos cannot come to an agreement on what the current social configuration surrounding Western tattooing is. This thesis sets out to investigate if there is such a community, or if such a group fits a different social figuration instead. Due to constraints brought on by COVID-19, it has been adapted to become an in-depth literature analysis with emic input from materials published from within the tattoo industry. This study also primarily focuses on North America, but does include international resources due to the high level of cross-cultural input historically and contemporarily. With a blending of insider and outsider resources, I intend to provide the most comprehensive compilation of possible social configurations theorized across disciplines, along with theorizing as best within my abilities the possible nature of a universal tattoo group in North America in my Honors Undergraduate Thesis.

Key words: Tattoo, Body modification, Community, Social figuration, Globalization

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INTRODUCTION

With the oldest known tattoos dating as far back as 3300 BCE[1], it is hard to deny that tattoos have a rich history around the world. With uses varying from medicinal and magical to decorative, tattoos have emerged and persisted among multiple cultures. But what about current tattoos in the United States? Where do they, and the people wearing them, stand within modern research? Surrounded by endless techniques to express individuality or group membership, what draws people towards tattooing? Especially on college campuses, it is near impossible to not pass someone with a tattoo (visible or not). How do these people relate to one another, or do they even feel some sort of comradery from this shared experience? The purpose of this paper is to explore questions frequently posed in academia but are often overlooked in day-to-day life. More clearly put, I intend to see how the social makeup around tattooing in the United States could be defined. Is there a tattoo community? Or even multiple communities that recognize each other as being similar and a part of something bigger together?

With perspectives from academic materials to self-published emic resources produced by individuals enmeshed with tattooing, I hope to pose a more solid answer than the research before me. This is a lofty goal, but useful in exploring the world of tattoos in a contemporary context. Equipped with other social and group configurations to explore additional possibilities, I will be attempting to categorize the social scope of North American tattooing in a recognizable grouping. Even if this project does not accomplish this, my secondary goal is to provide a

[1] The current oldest confirmed tattoos are on the mummified body of Ötzi, the Tyrolean Iceman (Deter-Wolf et al. 2016). For more information on Ötzi and the second oldest tattoos on a Chinchorro mummy, look to the online news articles written by Killgrove (2015) and Meier (2015).

jumping-off point for other researchers (or even curious individuals) to explore Western tattooing, present and past. As technological advances and the Internet continue to drastically change the industry even within the span of a year, I hope I can at least provide an accurate snapshot of tattooing in the United States at the time of writing for future generations.

The format of this thesis follows as the Table of Contents outlines. Following this very Introduction is the Literature Review. This section focuses primarily on the academic literature available on tattooing, as well as common avenues within such research. Recent ethnographies and innovative research are highlighted. Within this section, the idea of "being tattooed" versus "having tattoos" is introduced, and how this relates to academic research. To close it off, the most recent theories on the social configuration of North American tattooing is explored, as well as which authors have presented such ideas.

The next chapter focusing on methodology reviews the intention of this thesis and how it will be accomplished. Limitations brought onto the study via COVID-19 are also addressed. The following chapter focuses on the history of North American tattooing as a whole. Influential time periods are broken up into recognizable eras to easily grasp the key developments over time. The impact of cross-cultural contact and the growth of globalization is addressed in this section and frequently re-visited throughout this thesis.

The following chapter focuses on tattooing in a modern-day context, as well as revisiting some of the earlier developments that remain influential to today. To ensure that key topics are addressed, there are subsections addressing the technological and legal changes in the industry, as well as additional pivotal topics. Anything relating to globalization that is not addressed in earlier segments is covered, as well as the introduction of two separate schools of thought within the tattoo industry: old school and new school. Due to the limitations of being an Undergraduate

Honors Thesis, this section is not as detailed as I would like it to be to present the most comprehensive scope of the tattoo industry as a whole, as well as the social interactions tied to it. Despite this, as much material as possible has been explored and documented in this section.

Returning to the theories presented in the Literature Review, I will be applying such propositions to the current realm of tattooing with additional comments. Here is where I will be providing my own thoughts on the current shape and movement on the industry in relation to the current academic perspectives on its group organization. Following this, the addition of a chapter to reflect on everything encompassed was a conscious choice to express any additional thoughts that did not fit neatly into other spots in my thesis, as well as briefly reflecting on my own interaction with the industry.

Another equally conscious choice within my thesis is the mixing of non-academic sources to provide the most genuine expression of the tattoo industry, as written and expressed by those *living* in it. The intention of my thesis is not to speak over the lived experiences of tattooed individuals and tattoo artists, but to bring to light a more genuine view of the industry in the eyes of academia. With a deeply rooted academic history of linking tattoos to criminality, psychopathy and Others, the purpose of my thesis is to change this and to recognize the value of the tattoo industry *outside* of continuing this historic deep-seated bias.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tattoos have been a source of curiosity for the last couple of centuries, among academics and laymen alike. From travel accounts to peer-reviewed journals, there are countless resources across multiple languages that can be utilized in the pursuit to study and understand tattoos. Most modern publications focus on the medical aspects of tattooing, such as removal methods, allergens, possible carcinogens, and migrating ink[2]. Also within recent publication are articles focusing on the perceptions of tattoos and tattooed people (Lane 2014), archaeological discoveries (Gillreath-Brown et al. 2019), and even the legality of the practice in various regions (Kluger et al. 2020; Perzanowski 2017).

An integral starting point for anyone wanting to research tattoos or tattooed people is David Lane's "Tat's All Folks: An Analysis of Tattoo Literature" (2014), focusing on the current available research. With the breakdown of four main themes[3] across multiple disciplines, Lane has provided a wonderful resource for specific topics *within* tattooing and where to find more information. It is important to note though that Lane only mentions academic resources, with limited emic input. The oldest resource mentioned is Cesare Lombroso's *The Criminal Man* ([1876] 2006), which is noted as the beginning of academia's focus on tattoos and deviance (Garcia-Merritt 2014). Primarily, psychological studies focus on this aspect as a sign of psychopathology (Atkinson 2003; Lane 2014; Vail 1999), as well as some sociological research

[2] Migrating ink refers to when the pigment of a tattoo travels through the body and settles in the organs, most commonly the lymph nodes. (Greenfieldboyce 2021).
[3] The four main themes are: tattooed individuals, group behavior, art and cultural production, and the commodification of culture. Additional sub-categories explore these topics further (Lane 2014).

using the frameworks of deviance as a means of group membership (DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Sanders 2008; Sween 2008; Vail 1999).

Anthropological perspectives on tattooing tend towards cross-cultural analysis (DeMello 2000; Sanders 2008), archaeological discoveries (Deter-Wolf et al. 2016; Gillreath-Brown et al. 2019), or indigenous practices (Krutak 2020; Sanders 2008; Vail 1999). When approaching Western tattoos as a collective group (albeit in many different forms and constructs), sociology tends to provide the bulk of the literature (Atkinson 2003; Kosut 2006; Roberts 2015; Sanders 2008; Sween 2008; Vail 1999). Anthropological literature taking on a similar stance has slowly started to emerge (DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt 2014). Tattooing has also spread across other disciplines, such as marketing (Vail 1999), law (Perzanowski 2017), linguistics (Carrere and Peake 2020), and interdisciplinary studies (Friedman 2012, 2014).

Large-scale ethnographies have recently been published as books, such as works from Sanders ([1989] 2008), DeMello (2000), and Atkinson (2003). Sanders and Atkinson approach tattooing from a sociological perspective, whereas DeMello approaches the topic as an anthropologist. Originally published in 1989, Sanders' ethnographic account highlights the social aspects of becoming tattooed, how this new identity is managed, and how tattoo studios play an integral role in introducing people to the practice. It's also important to note that Sanders focuses on elements of deviance and socialization, inspiring many future publications to view tattooing along similar lines (DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Sween 2008; Vail 1999). A unique addition to the 2008 edition is the inclusion of a new preface, as well as an epilogue detailing the changes in the industry and academic literature since the initial publishing of his book.

The bulk of DeMello's ethnographic book is a highly detailed history of Western tattooing, primarily focusing on the United States (2000). DeMello also discusses the most

common gathering sites for tattooed individuals to connect with others, and how conventions and magazines have shifted the modes of communication. The most important thing highlighted in this publication is the rise of middle-class involvement in tattooing, leading to its recent redefinition in the eyes of the mainstream. There are some problems with DeMello's research though. "Middle class" is used to "refer to ideas and not people" (DeMello 2000, 7), yet she mentions earlier in the text the use of college education as the basis of identifying an informant as middle class or not. There are also remarks of not keeping statistics, immediately followed up by broad generalizations of *possible* statistical results of her participants (such as class, gender, and sexuality). Finally, there is the perpetuation of the "Cook Myth," where Captain Cook is believed to have brought tattooing to Europe (Friedman 2012, 2014). It is also important to note that DeMello frequently uses the words "tattoo community," but does not present a solid definition or clear outline of what constitutes such a community besides being highly stratified.

Atkinson (2003) moves away from deviance and advances the study of tattoos as a cultural form of expression. Much like Sanders, there is a focus on how such a practice is highly social, requiring an individual to interact with a vast network of social actors (tattooed and non-tattooed). Specifically, a figurational approach[4] is applied to Canadian tattooing. Due to the nearly identical tattoo history for both countries, Atkinson also has a strong history section involving the United States. There is also an emphasis on tattoo *enthusiasts*, differentiating individuals that dedicate time (and their selves) to tattooing, in comparison to passive individuals who may have a few tattoos but are not interested beyond that. Some enthusiasts do not quite fit

[4] A figurational approach views how individual behaviors relate to collective social activities over a long-term period, or in other words: examines the dynamic networks of how people mutually depend on each other over a period of time (Atkinson 2003).

the definition of a tattoo *collector* as described by Sanders ([1989] 2008) and Vail (1999), whereas some do.

Slowly, more research is being done by individuals who already have been enmeshed with tattoos and later turning to it as a topic of study. Frequently, such researchers had focused on other subjects while attending university, pursuing tattoos in their free time out of their own curiosity. Only at a later date, after already becoming involved in tattooing to some degree, do they shift their research focus to some of the many aspects present in tattooing. Such individuals that fit this trend that I am aware of include Sanders ([1989] 2008), DeMello (2000), and Atkinson (2003).

Despite such shifts in the nature of the research, there is still limited accessibility of such content outside of academia. Even as a university student, certain publications were difficult to access, let alone find. Some researchers have made a pointed effort to go against this trend and do their best to allow for open conversation and thought on the academic perspectives of tattooing (e.g., Deter-Wolf, Friedman, Krutak). Accounts like @archaeologyink on Instagram (associated with Dr. Aaron Deter-Wolf) and @tattoohistorian on Instagram and Twitter (run by Dr. Anna Felicity Friedman) are some examples of such outreach and interaction. Additionally, lectures not tied to a university or research facility are becoming increasingly popular (Krutak 2020; Troyer 2020). Future shifts in research trends may result from such interactions, as well as a continued growth in tattooing as an academic subject.

Tattooed or Has Tattoos?

When going through the current available literature, different ways to gauge an individual's involvement in tattooing comes up frequently. Similar divisions are discussed online

and in face-to-face conversations. The most common breakdown of an individual's involvement in tattooing revolves around the semantics between being "tattooed" and "having tattoos" (Carrere and Peake 2020; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Vail 1999). Such a debate has followed the tattoo industry from its history into the current day, and still can be a source of debate among individuals (Inked 2018). For some, the topic is something they've never considered in-depth and view broadly, whereas others have detailed definitions and continue to share such ideas and information. To demonstrate the most basic definitions of both: a *tattooed* individual tends to be someone with extensive tattoos, is knowledgeable in the practice, and is involved in the local (or even national) tattooing scene to some degree. A person that *has tattoos* is a casual consumer of tattoos that does not interact much with the industry or other tattooed individuals outside of actively getting tattooed.

When being looked at from a researcher's point of view, some include a third category or even completely different categorizations along similar lines. Examples would be Garcia-Merritt's (2014) additional group of people unacquainted with tattoos (who equally do not have tattoos), compared to Carrere and Peake's (2020) categorization of non-tattooed people, people with hidden tattoos, and people with visible tattoos. Similar considerations of division occur when studying body modifications overall (Roberts 2015; Sanders [1989] 2008). All of these categorizations are based around what is held as acceptable in the mainstream. To help demonstrate a broad idea of what these groupings mean, consider piercings. It is common and viewed as acceptable for women and girls to have their earlobes pierced in the West. More extreme piercings, such as wrist or stretched lip piercings, tend to be viewed less positively and garner a larger reaction from individuals typically not involved with body modification. A *tattooed* individual is more likely to be outside of the mainstream norms of how to modify a

body, whereas a person that *has tattoos* likely has a small amount that are used in acceptable ways in the eyes of the mainstream (such as a memorial or family tattoo).

There is very little research or available information that specifically looks into such divisions of individuals in tattooing. When consuming media produced from within the tattoo industry, similar sentiments are commonly expressed but not explicitly delved into in most cases. Search results across multiple platforms will fail to give you any satisfactory answers when searched for verbatim. With DeMello's comments of the community being highly stratified, it is not unlikely that such labeling functions to control the group membership surrounding tattooing (2000).

Similarly, personal definitions and conversations around what to call a person who creates tattoos exists within the industry. Around the time of the Tattoo Renaissance in the 1970s, the vernacular started to shift to call some of these people tattoo *artists*. The addition of "artist" and when this change occured becomes important because of the influx of traditionally trained artists flooding the tattoo industry. Shifting from easily repeatable images, the growth of custom one-time tattoo designs started to flourish and become the new norm, as well as an explosion of stylistic genres within the industry. With such changes, some research is beginning to view tattooing as an accepted art form (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Kosut 2006; Lodder 2010; Perzanowski 2017; Vail 1999). Prior to this, frequent terms for a person creating tattoos were simply a tattooer or tattooist (with a low usage of tattoo artist). Technically, other similar names but of a different connotation do exist, such as scratchers and stencil men[5], which are used

[5] A scratcher is an unlicensed tattooer, often with no formal training and working in un-sterile environments. It is also common for low-grade tattooing equipment to be used, or even non-tattooing equipment adapted for use. Stencil men refer to tattooers who do little to no design

in a derogatory manner to exemplify the lack of skill or artistic talent of such a person (DeMello 2000; Perzanowski 2017; Sanders [1989] 2008).

Unfortunately, there is no current research or online media looking into the uses of such word use as a means to understand or define the boundaries of such group membership for tattooing. This is not surprising, considering there are limited resources agreeing on what kind of group persists around the practice even. In the future, it may be useful to look at such self-categorizations and how that affects individuals on an interactional level, as well as how such information becomes standardized. For the purposes of this thesis, the semantic nuances between *tattooed* people and people *with tattoos* are moot unless stated otherwise. The same applies to tattoo *artist* and tattoo*er* due to the primary focus on the professional industry of tattooing when mentioned.

In a similar nature, some studies have applied theories of established-outsider relations (Elias and Scotson 1994), but with tattoos in relation to the dominant mainstream (Atkinson 2003; Rees 2016). In brief, overarching Western culture is seen as an established group, and so has greater access to various forms of power. Tattooing is studied as an outsider group, so there are unequal opportunities available, partly due to being introduced after the mainstream was established. This can help understand the outsider status commonly tied to tattooing, as well as understanding the new changes. It's important to remember that such power possessed by any group is not one sided or static, as well as the fluctuations caused by the interactions between groups. When looking through such a framework, it is possible to see how tattooing has become more popular and acceptable.

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work of their own and rely heavily on the work of others. Scratcher is still a common term in the tattoo industry, but stencil men has low usage.

Subculture, Community, or Figuration?

A variety of social configurations have been proposed when examining North American tattooing as a group endeavor. The theories with the current strongest evidence behind them lie between subculture (Roberts 2015), community (Carrere and Peake 2020; DeMello 2000), and figuration (Atkinson 2003). It is incredibly important to remember that the nature of tattooing, even within just the United States, continues to shift and a fitting label may continue to be elusive. Reading customer reviews on academic books about tattoos is proof enough. The material may have been published anywhere from the 1980s to the early 2000s, yet many sentiments have already changed among tattoo artists and enthusiasts. With this in mind, consider these possibilities for tattooing at this current time.

Derek Roberts' article, "Modified People: Indicators of a Body Modification Subculture in a Post-Subculture World" (2015) is unique in that it is one of the few studies done entirely online. Such a detail is vital considering the changes in the industry brought on by the Internet, and how it has become a primary site of exchange between tattooed people. Only a few other resources briefly explore the effect of the Internet on tattooing (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Perzanowski 2017; Sanders [1989] 2008). Roberts defines a subculture as "a group of people whose social distance from the larger society is influenced by social structure (e.g., social class) and whose members are committed to it as a long-term primary group" (2015, 1099). Positioned in postmodern theory, the argument is made for a subculture due to the fact that participants continue involvement in the group past youth (separate from being permanently marked), fulfill their personal needs of experiencing group membership, and share collective views of tattoos as being a long-term practice. Roberts especially stresses that the determination of such members to

remain active in such a group while facing hardships demonstrates the lasting nature of the group, resulting in a subculture. The central role of the body modification industry is frequently discussed, and how it helps cement a subcultural structure.

Yet across multiple publications, "tattoo community" is commonly used in reference to modern-day tattooing (e.g., Deter-Wolf et al. 2016; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Marczak 2007; Perzanowski 2017). When consuming media produced from within the tattoo industry, community is frequently referenced here too (e.g., Cloak and Dagger Tattoo London n.d.; Gilbert 2000; Inked; Tattoodo 2021). Due to the nature of anthropological and sociological studies, deeper questions are often asked. "What kind of community? Is this actually a community or [alternative] instead?" DeMello focuses on the possibility of an *imagined* community[6], built off of Benedict Anderson's theory on nationalism (1983). Anderson argues that a nation is a community of people that is *imagined* by the individuals who self-identify with said group. Such individuals feel a bond to other folks they may never have contact with or even know of, but still have a sense of connection (specifically, comradeship) due to the belief of a shared history or experience.

DeMello adapts such nationalistic theory to represent a possible definition applicable to the tattooing scene. Drawing from the collective history of Western tattooing and how tattooed individuals relate themselves to it, DeMello frequently explores the sense of *communitas*[7] felt between some members of this proposed community (2000, 23, 32-33). She is equally aware of

[6] DeMello's definition of an *imagined* community is a community "that members do not know each other and thus must imagine their connection to others in concrete notions" (e.g., kinship, ethnicity, class position) (2000, 40).
[7] Communitas describes the "feeling of homogeneity, equality, camaraderie, and a lack of hierarchy common among those who are marginalized or undergoing a liminal transition from one state to the next" (DeMello 2000, 23).

individuals who do not feel such a connection and express distaste in such interpretations (2000, 24-25). Despite being the main theory proposed, DeMello does acknowledge that such an interpretation does represent an "idealized view of the tattoo community" (2000, 23).

Carrere and Peake explore *communities of practice*[8] when examining the use of tattoos as a linguistic tool, primarily to express personal and group identity (2020). Though not looking at tattooed individuals as a unique group, such a construct is good to consider and keep in mind when studying tattoos. Regardless of being a casual consumer of tattoos or an enthusiast, an individual still learns 'acceptable' ways to use tattoos to express themselves through their interactions with other tattooed people. Such information gathered from interactions are useful when viewing other group possibilities.

Of a similar nature is Michael Atkinson's use of Norbert Elias' theory of social *figurations*[9] (2003). To create an argument for a tattoo figuration instead of a subculture, Atkinson breaks down an enthusiast's interactions into two main elements: "becoming tattooed as a process and developing of relationship chains in tattooing" (2003, 109). A key difference with Atkinson's use of figurations is the understanding of how non-tattooed people are involved in multiple levels of the socialization of becoming and being tattooed. Similar elements are explored in Sanders' ([1989] 2008) and DeMello's (2000) ethnographies, but in the backdrop of deviance and self-Othering. Atkinson shifts such discourse to also include non-stigmatizing interactions between non-tattooed and tattooed individuals, exploring how this affects what, where, and who gets tattooed, as well as who creates the tattoo. Instead of broaching tattoos as a

[8] A community of practice is "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor" (Carrere and Peake 2020, 47).
[9] A figuration is "a complex web of social relationships based on individual and group interdependencies" (Atkinson 2003, 6).

highly personal and private act (as posited in some other research), Atkinson specifically highlights all of the interdependencies between individuals in multiple contexts to demonstrate how incredibly fluid and social contemporary tattooing actually is.

METHODOLOGY

Due to elements outside of my control (e.g., the pandemic), my thesis shifted from active qualitative research with prospective participants into an in-depth literature analysis of existing academic and non-academic literature. My project necessitated the blending of sources to fully encompass other possible social configurations within North American tattooing, which could not be fully explored if not viewed from both insider and outsider perspectives. Due to the constantly changing nature of tattooing (such as its social acceptability and degree of practice), the majority of pieces utilized are as up to date as possible. Literature focusing on its history, as well as some European sources, are included since both are influential to the current state of tattooing. There is a high degree of cross-cultural interaction, historically and currently, as well as many aspects of the industry and culture being rooted in its history. I approached these questions throughout the synthesis of my work:

1. Is there a North American tattoo community, formal or self-identified?
2. Is this group bound or affiliated to one another due to the nature of the tattoo industry?
3. If there is not a community, what other possible social configurational definitions better represent this group?

Study Limitations

When initially proposing my thesis (before any forms were even touched), COVID-19 had just started to take root. Throughout the entire process, multiple parts of my thesis were up in the air or constantly being changed. In line with early predictions of the pandemic, I originally constructed my project to involve participant observation and semi-structured interviews. As semesters progressed, I had even reached out to prospective participants, consisting of tattoo

artists, apprentices, and heavily tattooed individuals. A wide range of age, gender, and tattoo experience would have been encompassed. The original scope of my thesis ended up becoming difficult to maintain with the IRB system becoming delayed and one of my main proposed sites closing down due to the financial burden of the pandemic. As a result of this shop's closure, all of those artists had to relocate to find work, resulting in some even moving across the country.

I did consider conducting as much of my original outline as possible, but through online or digitized means. I eventually decided otherwise due to a number of factors. Despite the internet becoming more influential to the success of the tattoo industry and the sharing of information overall, there unfortunately is data that can only be gathered through physical interaction. Bodily cues would be practically absent. I did not want to push my participants to feel as if they were *required* to video-chat with their camera on (or even be forced to participate synchronously), even though it can help make such communication feel more natural and less detatched. The format alone makes the environment feel more formal and rigid, whereas my initial goal was to create a comfortable environment that could facilitate easy-going conversations with back and forth between us. Tone of voice can be hard to understand through text or garbled through bad bandwidth. There's a higher likelihood of a participant suddenly dropping (from a call or the project), due to bad connection or a lack of interest. It is easier to abruptly leave a call than an in-person conversation. I am not claiming that I think any of my proposed participants would have such behavior, but I am aware of individuals in my own personal life that would do so. At the same time, the opportunities for natural small talk would be greatly reduced, removing any comments or thoughts that a participant originally considered insignificant during interviewing or otherwise. Part of my consideration also involved the possibility of my participants not knowing how to use some of the online tools that I had in

mind. Equally, there is also no convenient way to conduct participant observation in a physical shop through online means.

At the same time, there was a wide span of time where no tattoo artists were (legally) allowed to tattoo. As mentioned above, the toll of this resulted in the permanent closure of one of my main proposed sites, as well as countless shops across the United States (or even globally). Around the time such restrictions were being lifted locally, there were definitely concerns within the industry about getting back up to speed and regaining stability, while staying in line legally and remaining physically safe. This roughly lined up to when I was canvassing potential participants and soon to conduct interviews. Availability of the participants was a concern for me, due to not wanting to strain any pre-existing rapport or unintentionally keeping them from any work that would help them "catch up." With these factors in mind and knowing multiple relatively recent detailed ethnographies on tattooing exist, as well as a wide range of self-published materials within the industry, I ultimately decided to shift my thesis to an in-depth literature analysis.

HISTORY OF NORTH AMERICAN TATTOOING

It is important to know the history of North American tattooing to best understand the full scope of past and current sentiments affecting modern views of the practice and industry. Current associations of deviance and individuality are deeply entwined into multiple events that have occurred across the last couple of centuries around the globe. Previous researchers have provided broad time periods to best conceptualize the main changes and developments over each stage pivotal to the current iteration of tattooing culture within North America (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Sanders 2008; Perzanowski 2017). For the purposes of this paper, I will provide a blending of Atkinson (2003) and DeMello's (2000) categorization of time periods to provide ease of access and understanding, supplemented with additional information from other authors.

Multiple sources have mistakenly traced the beginnings of Western tattooing down to when Captain James Cook sailed to Tahiti in 1769 (Sanders 2008; DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Perzanowski 2017). It's not clear when or how this myth has started, but it could possibly be attributed to the etymological link of the modern word of "tattoo" with Captain Cook's writing about Tahitian *tatau* (or alternatively *ta-tu*) (Friedman 2012, 2014). Before the introduction of such a word, multiple different phrases were used to describe tattooing within English[10], but such a specialized word exists in other languages, such as Latin and French[11]. As attempted in this thesis, it is important to not skew history with broad generalizations or (accidentally) perpetuate myths by limiting sources.

[10] As noted by Friedman (2012, 19), "Thus we read that individuals had their skin or bodies 'pricked,' 'marked', 'engraved,' 'decorated,' 'punctured,' 'stained,' or, even, 'embroidered.' These processes resulted in 'black marks,' 'pictures,' 'paintings,' 'engravings,' and 'stains,' that were further described as 'permanent' or 'not able to be effaced.'"

[11] Latin texts tend to use *stigmata* for tattoos, while French texts have both a noun and a verb for tattoos (*piquage* and *piquer*, respectively) (Friedman 2012, 2014).

Earlier European exposure existed in multiple different ways, even as early as the Upper Paleolithic (Friedman 2012, 2014; Marczak 2007). Archaeological evidence has been slowly compiled over the years in the forms of preserved tools and even mummies (Deter-Wolf et al. 2016; Marczak 2007). Textual or physical evidence of tattooing traditions exists among the French, Italian, Romans, Greeks, Scythian-Siberians, and the Persians[12] (ibid.). Christian pilgrimage tattoos were popular during the Middle Ages, as well as seafarers recording and being tattooed by various indigenous groups during their travels. Traditional tattooing practices also existed among indigenous populations in the United States, yet were treated as a barbaric practice by Western society. Due to such beliefs, repeated attempts to end such practices occurred during colonization. Despite this, Captain Cook is still certainly pivotal in changing the view of tattooing in the eyes of Europeans. Such a voyage and resulting writings mark the *Colonialist or Pioneer Era* of Western tattooing, spanning roughly from the 1760s to the 1870s.

Captain Cook continued to make multiple trips around Polynesia, encountering additional indigenous tattoo traditions among the Samoans, Maori, and Hawaiians. Each culture contained their own religious and magical uses of tattoos, as well as specific design elements and unique techniques of application. Until the creation of the first electric tattoo machine in 1891, all Western tattooing was done similar to the Tahitian technique of 'hand-tapping' with needles or pricks attached to a short wooden or metal pole. Conversely, these continued interactions drastically affected all of these indigenous tattooing traditions, nearly driving many into extinction. By the 1800s, European imagery began to enter tribal tattooing, such as European

[12] Historic accounts of traditional Pictish or Celtic tattooing grow less-likely as archaeological and historical records point towards a long line of 'telephone' and possible mistranslations between Classical authors (Dibon-Smith 1990; Marczak 2007).

flags, ships, guns, and cannons. Among the Maori, *moko*[13] tattoos almost died out due to local fears of being killed, beheaded, and mummified for colonial trade[14]. It took almost a century for the practice to begin again. Repeated visits from missionaries additionally decreased the presence of native tattooing.

Starting around the late 1770s, tattooed natives started to be exported to Europe as living proof of primitivism and were profited from. This practice continued for many decades and overlaps into the next distinct era. Some of the most well documented individuals include Prince Giolo ("Jeoly") of Meangis, who is often recorded as the first recorded tattooed native on display[15], as well as the Tahitians Omai and Tupia, who were brought back on one of Captain Cook's later expeditions (DeMello 2000; Friedman 2012, 2014; Krutak 2013). Some individuals were displayed in 'living museums' and others as 'wild men' in dime shows and traveling circuses. Paradoxically, Captain Cook's crew started to willingly get tattooed by 1784, soon inspiring an increase of sailors to become tattooed to visually symbolize their sense of adventure, free spirits, and exoticism. Through the display of captured natives and sailors returning with tattoos, Europe continued to be exposed as an invigorated overall interest slowly grew. These initial avenues of exposure had a marked effect on the United States and how tattooing began to

[13] *Moko* are spiraling facial tattoos worn by Maori men and women. Each design represents the individual's status and affiliations and are highly personalized (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Gay and Whittington 2002; Sanders [1989] 2008).
[14] In 1770, Europeans started trading weapons for preserved Maori heads. The situation quickly escalated, especially during the tribal wars in the 1820s, and it became dangerous to wear a moko. Colonial authorities finally banned the trade in 1831 (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000).
[15] The actual first documented indigenous tattooed person in Europe was a Canadian Inuit woman and her (not tattooed) child kidnapped in 1566. They were put on display by the following year in the Netherlands. The first tattooed indigenous people on display in England were two Inuit kidnapped in 1577. Prince Giolo was bought around 1691 (Krutak 2013).

take root in a new location. Important developments that started to occur during this time would lead into the next noted era.

The first known professional tattoo shop in the West opened in 1846 by Martin Hildebrandt in New York. It is important to note that his clientele almost solely focused on servicemen and carnival workers. Individuals seeking tattoos no longer had to go overseas to get tattooed. During this period, Hildebrandt was able to tattoo servicemen that participated in the American Civil War and Spanish-American War (DeMello 2000). An unintended consequence of this was easier identification of fallen men, which did not go unnoticed, and contributed to strengthening the now recognized tradition of American servicemen being tattooed (ibid.). On the same hand, an important development within this period rode on the shoulders of enthusiasm and curiosity. Embracing new technology as it came, the very beginnings of 'homegrown' tattoos with uniquely American designs started to emerge.

By the 1880s and into the 1920s, tattooing was squarely within its *Circus or Carnival Era*. Just outside of this range, the first staged exhibits of 'primitive peoples' occurred at the Centennial Exposition in Pennsylvania in 1876. The majority were taken as slaves and shown to crowds in chains and loincloths as an antithesis of modernity. This practice quickly became popular and spread across the United States. Returning and retired servicemen noticed the large profits tattooed natives drew into dime shows and circuses, and took initiative to include themselves in the profits. Clearly of European descent, stories of capture and forced tattooing from non-Christian savages were crafted to sell this new type of 'live wild men.' Audiences seemingly ignored the high presence of American iconography within these men's tattoos, and continued to eagerly attend these shows. Buffalo's World Fair in 1901 featured the first 'freak

show' involving tattooed people, strengthening the North American association of tattoos and carnivals (Atkinson 2003).

The first electric tattoo machine was built by Samuel O'Reilly in New York by 1891. This is incredibly important to note because tattoos suddenly took less time (and pain) to create in comparison to the older technique done entirely by hand. This initial model was based off of Thomas Edison's perforating pen (DeMello 2000; Nyssen 2015). During this same period, more color options slowly began to develop and designs accentuated patriotism, rather than earlier notions of exoticism. This is when American Traditional tattoos started to become the recognizable style and own separate stylistic genre that is replicated today. During the early 1900s, the market for male tattooed carnival workers or performers was oversaturated due to this technological advancement. It was not unusual for tattoo artists to travel with a specific troupe, or to only set up shop when a performance was in town (DeMello 2000). It became difficult to earn enough money to make a living as *just* a tattooed attraction, and many individuals were forced to combine acts or quit.

There was a loophole in this situation that quickly increased profits once more though. The door was finally open for women to formally enter the Western world of tattoos. Framed in the same type of story as tattooed acts before them, these acts frequently involved a high level of exposure of the female body to show off such tattoos. With the two elements combined, audiences were hooked and drawn in, making female tattooed performers one of the most profitable and frequent acts up until the late 1940s (Atkinson 2003). Some of the earliest female tattoo artists are also recorded during this time period. The interbellum between World Wars (1918-1939) is sometimes referred to as the Golden Age of Tattooing due to the patriotic enthusiasm expressed through tattoos, leading to an overwhelmingly positive social perception of

them for the first time (DeMello 2000; Perzanowski 2017). The industry shifted to focus on the needs of soldiers and sailors. Typically coming in large groups with limited leave, tattoo machines and the development of *flash*[16] allowed for quick turnaround and easily capitalized off the rising popularity of tattoos.

The next notable phase is the *Working Class Era*, roughly landing along the 1920s to the 1950s. The public view of tattoos being only present among circus performers shifted to proud announcements of the owner's patriotism. Tattoo parlors shifted to downtown or big city locations, becoming informal social clubs where men could swap grandiose stories of bravery and adventure. With the decline of carnival work and tattooing becoming a hypermasculine outlet, women were quietly excluded from getting tattooed by the industry once more for many decades. Some female tattoo artists continued to persist despite this shift. At the same time, the social acceptability of tattoos began to decline once again around the 1920s. There was less enthusiasm for them in workforces outside of the military and the sanitary conditions surrounding tattoos started to raise health concerns (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Gay and Whittington 2002; Perzanowski 2017). DeMello speculates that the Nazi practice of tattoos may have also contributed to these growing negative perceptions (2000).

Around the 1940s, states started to enact laws setting minimum age requirements, as well as paying closer attention to the sanitary condition of tattoo shops. One of the first notable legal

[16] *Flash* are sheets of easily repeatable tattoo designs that are often bought, sold, and duplicated across the industry. These sheets are almost like an encyclopedia of similar designs and frequently resemble a collage. There are unspoken rules on how to properly use flash (e.g., minimal color or word changes). An example of an improper use of flash would be selling or advertising it as your own work after purchase or using it on merchandise (when you are not the creator of that flash).

actions against tattooing was Charlie Wagner VS New York in 1944 over needle sterilization[17]. Community ink pots with dirty Lysol water and sponges (changed anywhere between daily to weekly) were among the norm (DeMello 2000). Despite the acceptability of tattooing declining, this period was still full of important developments that still affect the industry today.

Flash took root as the lifeblood supporting tattooing. By having easily repeatable images available on the wall (with set prices) to be chosen by a customer, it was a quick and efficient way to maximize profits without losing time to creating fresh new images or dealing with haggling. Lew "the Jew" Alberts helped popularize the use and spread of flash sheets across the United States (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Perzanowski 2017). No explicit rules were given with early sheets and were inherently understood to only allow limited alterations (such as changing colors or names in the design). The specific iconography stylistically noted as American Traditional was solidified and quickly spread with the use of flash. Flash remains popular today and spans across multiple different stylistic genres. A small range of flash does pre-date Lew's involvement, but did not travel far from where it was originally created (in comparison to how far Lew's flash has). At the same time, formal apprenticeships with known professional tattoo artists took hold in this period, compared to the loose training and occasional advice in earlier decades.

The *Rebel Era* is best known to span from 1950 to 1970. The growing negative sentiments of tattooing fully took hold during this period. The Navy started to advise against getting tattooed around the 1950s (DeMello 2000). In 1959, the death of a recent tattoo client

[17] Wagner was able to have his fine reduced by claiming he was completing essential war work by adding clothing to naked lady tattoos. Around this same time, the government was starting to crack down on "tasteless" tattoos worn by servicemen (DeMello 2000).

from hepatitis spurred New York City to ban tattooing altogether (Perzanowski 2017). This alone caused a cascade of criminal bans across the States, partly based on local hepatitis outbreaks[18] (Perzanowski 2017; DeMello 2000). At the same time, tattooing was starting to be used by various social groups to show their collective discontent with society, ranging from social movements, political protest, to individuals considered part of the social underbelly[19]. Two groups that are impactful during this period that have strengthened tattooing's link with deviance are prisoners and biker gangs. Some researchers also include the Chicano subculture because a distinct tattooing style originated from their use around this time (DeMello 2000).

Within prisons, there is limited materials to tattoo with, resulting in gear being jerry-rigged together. Because of this, a unique style of prison tattooing emerged, persisting of fine line (single needle) designs using black or blue ink (from pens or created from burnt objects). The terminology 'tattoo gun' also comes from prison tattooing (Atkinson 2003). At the same time, biker gangs used tattoos as a way to mark their group membership and prevailing sentiments on their bodies to be read by others. Both groups ended up using tattoos in similar manners as "both an encoded language of rebellion articulating disaffection with broader society and a lexicon of symbols instantly distinguishing [themselves] from others in society" (Atkinson 2003). The 1950s and 1960s are frequently referred to as the 'dark ages' of North American tattooing, as the social control and perceptions of the industry shifted greatly.

[18] The states banning tattoos due to hepatitis outbreaks are New York, Oklahoma, Virginia, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Ohio, Arkansas, Wisconsin, Tennessee, and Michigan (DeMello 2000).

[19] Specific movements and sources of political unrest include the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and the Stonewall riots (1969), as well as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Atkinson 2003; Carrere and Peake 2020; DeMello 2000; Rees 2016).

Soon after, the *Tattoo Renaissance* hit. Some researchers place the beginning within the late 1960s, whereas more agree with the 1970s (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Lane 2014; Marczak 2007; Perzanowski 2017; Rees 2016; Sanders [1989] 2008; Sween 2008; Vail 1999). For Atkinson, he places the *New Age Era* between 1970 and 1990. Undoubtedly, multiple tattoo artists, historians, and researchers agree that the biggest changes in tattooing occurred in the 70s. Before then, only five basic ink colors were available for purchase[20]. Purple was soon introduced into the pallet, allowing for a boon of new creative designs and options[21]. From this point on, ink colors continued to expand and truly exploded in the 1990s. Tattoo machines continued to improve as well, becoming more efficient with even less pain involved in the process over time[22]. Sterilization techniques were also greatly improved, among the creation of sturdier magnum tattoo needles by Filip Leu[23] (Magni 2018; Sanders [1989] 2008).

Advancements can be made in an industry without public interest or approval, but this too changed once again. Within the Tattoo Renaissance, women re-entered the scene and did not take a passive role. A surge in female tattoo artists is prominent during this time, as well as the deconstruction of the culturally assumed masculinity of tattooing (DeMello 2000). They quickly became one of the most influential groups within tattooing, as well as middle class customers.

[20] The five basic colors were black, red, blue, brown, and yellow (Sanders [1989] 2008). Green would be made by mixing colors and was not always consistent.
[21] Sailor Jerry is credited with inventing purple ink to prove to another tattooer that it can exist (The Manual n.d.; Slaughter 2017).
[22] For more information on early tattoo machines, look to Nyssen's online article (2015). The majority of tattoo machines continue to be based around the core designs of Samuel O'Reilly and Charlie Wagner.
[23] To hear how Filip Leu ended up introducing magnum needles into the industry, look to his 2018 interview with Jerry Magni.

Both groups demanded more personalized and sensitive treatment during the tattoo process, as well as pushing for higher quality work (DeMello 2000; Rees 2016; Roberts 2015; Sanders [1989] 2008; Sween 2008). With the attention and involvement of the middle class, tattooing itself went through major social re-definition to become a more acceptable practice within the eyes of the overall public again. Not free of its deviant past that many people are still acutely aware of, acceptable reasons to get tattooed once again emerged to legitimize an individual's involvement, as well as the renewed surge of interest in the tattoo industry. Tattoos had been used by individuals to express identity politics in past decades, but had now shifted to be an accessible tool to do so for a wider audience with new reasoning behind them. Tattoos continue to express individuality as well as an individual's own beliefs and social connections today.

A renewed interest in Non-Western imagery also took hold during the Renaissance. Providing new avenues of expression and reflecting alternative beliefs or lifestyles compared to Western standards proved attractive and popular to newcomers and oldcomers alike. The country with the biggest stylistic impact on North American tattooing, historically and currently, is Japan[24]. For comparison, tattooing within the United States prior to modern cross-cultural influence remained quite similar to badges or stickers, consisting of separate images with little (or no) physical overlap on the same skin. Large-scale, *connected* compositions were relatively rare and just as rarely sought after[25]. The first tattoo artist to achieve a unified look across larger

[24] For easily accessible online resources on specifically Japan's tattooing, look to the articles published by Japanology (Barton 2019) and tsunagu Japan (Dayman 2019). For some of the historic Western overlap, look to Takjo's page on irezumi symbology (n.d.). Sailor Jerry and Ed Hardy are frequently credited in the Western tattoo industry for introducing and solidifying the presence of Japanese tattoos in the industry.

[25] Some large-scale tattoos had been done since the 1940s but did not achieve a unified look as characterized by Japanese tattoos (DeMello 2000).

pieces was Norman Keith Collins (also known as Sailor Jerry), due to his repeated contact with well-known Japanese tattoo masters.

By having a close business relationship with Horihide, Horiyoshi II, and Horisada, Jerry was successful in 'borrowing' the Japanese aesthetic style to bring to life the spirit of Americana in his designs (DeMello 2000). He was also successful at inspiring and teaching the next generation of influential tattooers, such as Don Ed Hardy, Mike "Rollo" Malone, Zeke Owen, and more (DeMello 2000; Perzanowski 2017; Rees 2016; Slaughter 2017; Vail 1999). Another influential artist prolific during the Renaissance is Samuel Steward (with the pseudonyms of Phil Sparrow and Phil Andros), a Ph.D. holding English professor turned professional tattoo artist (Aron 2017; Atkinson 2003; Espinet 2019; DeMello 2000; Gay and Whittington 2002). Phil Sparrow (his tattooing name) was an early instructor to Don Ed Hardy, among others, and is one of the first openly gay tattoo artists known in the industry. Another tattoo artist elevated to legendary status, Lyle Tuttle[26], did not push stylistic changes in the industry, but had pushed for the largest pro-tattooing publicity campaign during this time by frequently appearing across multiple public media sources (such as television shows to local and national articles) (DeMello 2000). Such publicity, reaching as far as *Time* and *Life* magazines, helped promote and popularize a more professional view of contemporary tattooing.

Unique groups of individuals also started to emerge from the tattooing scene, such as Modern Primitives and "collectors." Modern Primitives emerged from the resurgence of tribal style tattooing as fashionable (often known as neo-tribal stylistically), as well as expressing a

[26] Lyle Tuttle is also notable for being the first person to tattoo someone on all seven continents (and received tattoos on six). Tuttle has recently passed (March 26, 2019) and is known for tattooing many celebrities. His shop still currently functions and doubles as a tattoo museum, housing his extensive history collection.

distaste for the dehumanizing nature of modern life (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Lane 2014; Rees 2016; Roberts 2015; Sanders 2008; Sween 2008). Such a group pushes for individuals to consider 'returning to your roots' and finding more traditional means of connecting with others as a community. Emergence of such a group helps demonstrate the complete embrace of Non-Western designs and meanings by the 1980s. As for tattoo collectors, they emerged from the new cultural capital and popularity certain professional tattoo artists carried and the desire to bear unique designs and the prestige that came with the name, as well as an appreciation of the artist's specific style and tattooing overall. It is important to note the amount of time, money, and travel that such collectors invest in their tattoos overall, similar to the strains and struggles of more traditional physical collections. To be seen as a tattoo collector has become an honorific to recognize the dedication serious individuals put into their body (Sanders 2008). Further study into specifically tattoo collectors and how they socialize has been conducted around the tail end of this period (Vail 1999).

Multiple new styles of tattoos also developed, with specific professional tattoo artists innovating at the forefront of their genre. Examples of this would be biomechanical (Guy Aitchison), black and grey "dark art" (Paul Booth), New School (sometimes written as New Skool), and neo-Japanese (also known as contemporary Japanese or American Japanese). It is undeniable that tattooing exploded during its renaissance, but when does it end? This is a harder date to pin down between researchers, historians, and tattoo artists. Some contend that we are still currently within the renaissance, whereas others believe everything finally leveled out around the 2000s. There are some that believe we are currently in a *second* renaissance, characterized by rapid technological and stylistic advancement due to the power of the Internet (DeMello 2000; Vail 1999). Undeniably, the Internet has become an indispensable tool to the

modern-day tattoo artist, whether they're new or an old timer. We will be exploring current day tattooing and developments in the next section of this thesis.

CURRENT CLIMATE OF TATTOOING

Aided by the initial waves of innovation in the Renaissance, tattooing continues to be pushed stylistically and technologically today. Atkinson places his next historic era from 1990 on, calling it the *Supermarket Era*. For the sake of clarity, I am not saying that we have moved out of the Renaissance, but it is important to recognize that the most recent shift in modern day tattooing is currently in effect. Some of the most drastic characteristics come from the accessibility of the Internet, changing the speed at which information is shared, as well as the growth of more diverse groups getting tattooed.

As mentioned in the literature review, only a few researchers have investigated how tattooing has embraced the Internet, as well as some unintended consequences (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Perzanowski 2017; Sanders [1989] 2008). In the past, tattoo supplies and information could only be gathered through personal connections, effectively controlling who could partake in the industry. Often these materials were handmade by specific individuals and could be traced back to them due to having unique characteristics. As tattoo magazines became popular, larger supply companies started to take root and eventually started placing ads (DeMello 2000). Not all of these companies were run by tattoo artists or had the long-term future of the industry in mind.

An eventual consequence of this was the influx of tattooers who did not complete a formal apprenticeship with a well-established tattoo artist, also known as scratchers. Tattoo magazines slowly started to include “how to” articles, as well as tips and tricks to improve the quality of your work (DeMello 2000). With many individuals having a formal art education behind them as well, it was not difficult for some to create a name for themselves as custom tattoos grew in popularity with the middle class participating in the industry more. Since the

Renaissance, the market has become flooded and highly competitive across the United States. It's not unusual now to have multiple shops within the same neighborhood in some locations, compared to one shop in a large city (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000). The overall travel time of possible customers has greatly decreased, with the exception of collectors.

The Internet has taken on a similar trend as magazines have. With an explosion of blogs, ebooks, video tutorials, and online 'tattoo schools'[27], an endless amount of material on "how to tattoo" is available within seconds thanks to search engines such as Google. There have been no studies looking into scratchers and how they function outside and within the tattoo industry, though such investigation could be fruitful on many fronts considering some successfully integrate into the professional industry. An important thing to note is that due to a lack of formal training or legal licensing, many scratchers function only at a local level by word of mouth to avoid extensive negative consequences. Some do run their own Instagram pages in a similar manner to professional tattoo artists like a digital portfolio. The photos shared sometimes feature no gloves, unusual equipment, unsanitary working environments, 'chewed' tattoos[28], with even pets and children in the background. There are also some Instagram accounts that purposefully re-post these images for comedy reasons (e.g., @suckytattoos).

[27] Tattoo schools are often not backed by any reputable tattoo artists. After charging high fees, only minimal technical information is taught with limited hands-on experiences that are otherwise associated with traditional apprenticeships. Such schools are seen as preying on individuals looking to break into the already flooded tattoo market for profit.

[28] A 'chewed' tattoo is a tattoo that has been overworked, effectively shredding or mulching the underlying skin. This can also happen to a tattoo where the needle continually goes too deep or has been touched by the needle too much. Common signs of this are excessive irritation, such as very raised or reddened skin, or a change in the skin's texture that can be visually noted even. Instead of a smooth-skinned tattoo when healed, the result is a raised tattoo riddled with scarring (which is difficult to effectively cover-up in comparison).

At the same time, countless guides and YouTube videos outlining what to do to become an apprentice are equally available within a quick search. More incoming apprentices enter the field with some prior knowledge, looking to improve their personal skills, instead of learning about tattooing from an experienced individual with a clean slate. There have been mixed feelings on this change. Some shops turn away individuals that have been dabbling in their free time, while some shops require some proof of pre-existing skill. Even if an attempting apprentice is denied by multiple locations, there are countless cheaply made tattooing kits available on Amazon and eBay that include items such as rubber practice skin, multiple ink colors, and full machine sets. Not all supply companies confirm the legal licensing of the buyer, allowing literally any paying individual to acquire tattooing equipment (including underage potential buyers). This is especially true for the kits and supplies purchased from Amazon and eBay.

With the breakdown of the reliance on apprenticeships and a flooded market, there has been a noticeable rise in the amount of copying within the industry. Despite many tattooers being praised for the uniqueness of their designs, the Internet has made it easier to copy without being caught if the individual is using designs from across the country (or world). With such distance between tattooers in such a case, it can be difficult to manage such situations or even be aware of them. When creating a custom tattoo, there is the agreement between tattoo artist and client that this piece is unique to them and *only* them. Reusing the design or lightly tweaking it for another client is a break of the trust between them (Perzanowski 2017). Another tattoo artist stealing this design is also technically a breach of what is expected in the working agreement, but cannot be controlled by either the original artist or client.

It is important to recognize that the industry norms of right and wrong are traditionally passed down through the apprenticeship system common in tattooing (Perzanowski 2017). It is

also equally important to recognize that nothing is truly original in art. This is especially true in certain styles, such as American Traditional, which is based on easily repeatable flash that has followed a particular pattern for many decades. There are only so many ways to draw an anchor, eagle, or dragon. Most tattoo artists do recognize this gray area and carefully draw inspiration from others, but the morality of direct copying varies on a couple of factors (Perzanowski 2017).

Currently, most tattoo shops exist along a spectrum. On one end there are 'street shops' and on the other end there are 'high-end shops.' A generalized street shop relies on flash or easily repeatable designs brought in by the customer, with quick turnaround. The optimal location for such a shop would be in a high traffic area, focusing on walk-in clients more than appointments. A generalized high-end shop focuses on custom designs, prioritizing clients with appointments who pay the artist by the hour, not the design. Such a shop tends to be away from busy streets with minimal signage. It's not uncommon for such a shop to also be booked out months (or even years) in advance, with clients frequently returning to continue work on large scale pieces that necessitate multiple visits. Most commonly, I have encountered locations that sit somewhere around the middle of this spectrum (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Perzanowski 2017; Sanders [1989] 2008).

Street shops have a reputation for being a site where copying is minimally opposed. Quick client turnaround and marginal design time tends to be a common theme. With such things in mind, additional time spent outside of the shop can be focused on other activities instead of the creation of designs that may or may not end up being used. It is not unheard of for tattoo artists focusing on custom work to spend large portions of their time drawing out possible designs when they are not in the act of tattooing. Another shift caused by the sharing of information on the Internet is the growth of "Pinterest or Google flash." Even if an artist focuses

on custom designs, clients frequently provide images from Pinterest or Google for what they *exactly* want. A common hallmark of a 'good tattooer' is convincing a client to use such images for inspiration, and not copying, but sometimes this is a difficult task to accomplish (Perzanowski 2017; Sanders [1989] 2008).

There are also situations where prospective clients steal designs from one tattoo artist, and go to another artist that does the tattoo at a cheaper price. This can be a one-time design that the first artist is advertising for availability online, or it can be one designed specifically for the potential client before attending the intended appointment. Some artists manage these situations by not advertising such designs online (only physically keeping them in the shop) or not sharing potential designs with a prospective client until the agreed appointment. Understandably, not all individuals are comfortable with not seeing their soon-to-be-permanent design until just before getting it inked. Commonly, artists who practice this ensure to have extra time for redesigning to guarantee the best results and a happy client. If an agreement cannot be made, additional appointments can be made or the project can be dropped.

Another common situation that any tattoo artist relying on appointments faces are "no call, no shows." Despite a prospective client scheduling a specific time with a design already picked, it is not entirely uncommon for them to just 'disappear' without forewarning. This can be devastating to an artist if such a client has scheduled a large block of time, which cannot always be filled at the last minute with a new client. To manage the negative effects of such an event, most tattoo artists require a non-refundable deposit that is put towards the total cost of the tattoo or session. Such a requirement motivates some clients to ensure that they keep their appointment, while still ensuring that a minimum amount of income is guaranteed for the stood-up tattoo artist if such an event still happens.

Traditionally, the industry has functioned with cash as the main medium of payment. The advancement of electronic payment methods has slowly crept into shops as well. It varies between locations, but the most common medium is still cash. Some shops or specific artists provide alternative options, such as card or online payments (e.g., PayPal, Venmo, Apple Pay). The danger with this is the possibility of declined cards or bounced funds. You can't exactly reverse the time spent or scrub off a tattoo when a client cannot pay in such a situation.

Tipping the tattoo artist is also common. The United States industry standard sits around 10-15% of the total price of the tattoo or session (Garcia-Merritt 2014). For multi-session tattoos, some clients tip every session or only once. Not all tattoo artists require or mention tips when working with clients. Individuals frequently getting tattooed, such as returning clients and enthusiasts, are often the most consistent tippers (DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt 2014). Such a tipping manner is learned through the continued interaction with the industry and other tattooed individuals. Tips larger than the average and even material gifts can be given to a tattoo artist as a "thank you" or a sign of good faith. Such deviation tends to be from regular clients who are familiar with the personalities of their specific artist and the everyone else who works in the shop.

Technology

Even since the 1990s, a wide range of technological changes have occurred. Instead of welding together your own needles by hand and sterilizing them for continued use with an

autoclave[29], single-use pre-sanitized needles have become the new industry standard. New needle point configurations have been developed over time, such as magnum and bug pin[30] to allow for different artistic effects when inking the skin. Disposable cartridges have also been developed, skipping the need to ensure you have the right size tubing necessary to direct the needle through. Such cartridges only work with specific machines manufactured by certain manufacturers though. Vegan[31], hypoallergenic[32] and UV-reactive[33] tattoo inks have been developed. The difficulty with developing inks alternative to the industry standard is testing for its longevity, saturation, and brightness. Several successful inks have been developed despite these challenges. Following the Black Lives Matter movement, some companies attempted to market ink designed for darker skins and were faced with backlash[34].

Tattoo machines have also gone through development as well. For a long period, most electric tattoo machines were either rotary or coil based and required a direct power supply via a cord. Coil tattoo machines create the buzzing sound associated with tattoo shops, whereas rotary

[29] An autoclave is a machine that sterilizes items by using pressure and heated steam and is most frequently used in laboratories. Autoclaves adapted for the tattoo industry are smaller than their laboratory counterparts but are just as effective.
[30] For accessible online information on different needle types and their different uses, look to Avery (2016) and Barber DTS (n.d.).
[31] For an accessible online article on vegan inks and some of the differences compared to industry standard inks, look to Zuppello (2019).
[32] For an accessible in-depth online resource on hypoallergenic inks, look to the page published by Hypoallergenic Homes (2018). There are detailed breakdowns of the main ingredients, broken up by color even, as well as how to identify an ink allergy and what ingredients to avoid.
[33] For an accessible online article on UV-reactive (or blacklight) tattoos, look to Adamakos' article in Inked Magazine (2019).
[34] There's a long history behind the claim of "Darker skin does not tattoo well or does not hold color." Numerous tattoo artists have been vehemently proving this claim otherwise but has gained a much wider audience since the BLM Movement in 2020. For more information from POC artists themselves, please look to the YouTube video "Exploring the Black Experience in Tattooing | Intersectional Ink" and "Tattooing on Dark Skin (Ft. Ryan Henry) | INKED" by Inked. Multiple artists featured have further resources on the topic.

machines are much quieter (Barber DTS 2017). In 2000, a pneumatic tattoo machine was developed by Carson Hill, using air compressors to drive the needle up and down (Shero 2014). Recently, cordless machines have been popular, allowing a tattoo artist to move freely without catching the cord on anything within the workstation. Most 'pens' tend to be rotaries due to the low noise and smoother movement of the needle. Portable plug-in power supplies have also become more common over time.

The laser removal of tattoos has also greatly improved within the last couple of decades. The first successful laser treatment was in 1965 by Dr. Leon Goldman. Various different lasers were developed and used over the next couple of decades, but resulted in undesirable side effects (e.g., permanent pigmentation issues and scarring). In the 1990s, Q-switched lasers became popular because they could break down specific pigments, yet require numerous treatments. Currently, picosecond (trillionths of a second) lasers have been the most successful iteration of laser removal techniques developed with the least amount of undesirable side effects and in fewer sessions.[35]

The Internet and social media have had a drastic influence on the current tattoo industry in the United States. Facebook and Instagram[36] have become hubs to share information and pictures of tattoos, as well as an advertising resource. Due to Instagram focusing on picture and video content, it has become a very popular tool for tattoo artists to share their work and connect to clients and other tattoo artists. Many of these profiles tend to reflect a digital portfolio that

[35] For more detailed information, look to the resources "History of Tattoo Removal" and "The History of Laser Tattoo Removal Technology."
[36] Other social media sites are used, but Instagram and Facebook are the primary avenues. The controversial app TikTok has become a hotbed of do-it-yourself tattoo videos, as well as 'challenges.' Similar videos do exist on YouTube, but to a much lesser degree.

clients can view without coming into the shop, which is especially useful for collectors who travel. At the same time, promotions of various kinds can be advertised to a wide audience too, such as guest spots in new locations, confirming convention attendance, fundraising flash events, and giveaways. This network of connections has also been used to help innumerable tattoo artists across the country when accidents have occurred (e.g., break-ins, theft, personal injury, natural disaster). Frequently, such support is extended to friends of friends, acquaintances, or even strangers who the poster (or re-poster) may or may not know. Arguably, the explosion of connections across the country (and farther) have made the biggest impact on the current climate of the North American tattoo industry.

At the same time, the advent of television shows featuring tattoos has also increased the visibility of them in the mainstream, providing previously unavailable information to a wider audience as well as sensationalizing some aspects. There is only a handful of publications viewing the relation between tattoos and television (Kosut 2006; Rees 2016; Sanders [1989] 2008). Some of the video media available is presented in a documentary format, following the lives of tattooed individuals in their daily goings (like "2000 Tattoos, Don't Judge Me (Tattoo Prejudice Documentary) | Real Stories" by Real Stories on YouTube) or exploring indigenous and traditional uses of tattoos (such as *Tattoo Hunter* with Lars Krutak). The most frequent TV show structure on tattooing is the reality show format (like *Inked* and the entire '*Ink*' series with different locales of Miami, LA, London, and New York), as well as contest or competitive style shows (including the various iterations of *Ink Master*, as well as *How Far Is Tattoo Far?* and *Tattoo Titans*). There are also shows specifically focusing on 'bad' tattoos (like *Tattoo Nightmares*, *Tattoo Fixers*, and *Bad Tattoos*). Additionally, there are also shows that continue to perpetuate the negative psychological perceptions of tattooing (such as *My Tattoo Addiction*).

With the popularity of such shows, previously unfamiliar individuals are able to gain information that they would originally have no access to unless they were personally involved in tattooing or actively involved in related research. There are upsides and downsides to this though. As noted by Kosut (2006) and Rees (2016), more individuals are inspired to get tattooed thanks to this continued exposure in the mainstream, as well as celebrities increasingly embracing the practice. Viewers are also exposed to a wider range of different stylistic genres than they likely would not encounter in their day-to-day life, as well as possible medicinal uses (such as mastectomy tattoos in *Ink Master*). Especially in relation to competition style shows, some tattoo artist participants have later expressed distaste in the format, as well as how it has affected clientele in their normal business operations. Increasingly, new clients (especially those who have never been tattooed) perceive themselves to be knowledgeable on the stylistic and technical aspects of tattooing thanks to these shows and attempt to micromanage the experience more or be more hypercritical of their new tattoo than previously noted before the popularity of such shows. Further research or documentation on this subject would be beneficial, as well as viewing any continued trends caused by the television exposure of tattooing.

Legality

Even within the 2000s, the legal state of tattooing has been unsteady in the United States. New York City had only lifted its thirty-three-year ban in 1997 (DeMello 2000; Perzanowski 2017), with tattooing remaining completely illegal in South Carolina and Oklahoma until the mid-2000s (Perzanowski 2017). In many states and cities, tattoo shops are still under strict zoning regulations or local bans. Often times, they are placed on par with pawn shops and strip

clubs[37] (ibid). In 1998, the U.S. Army Regulations on "Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia" (AR 670-1) was changed to ban tattoos that are 'indecent' or are tied to extremist organizations (Gay and Whittington 2002). This is not the only regulation pertaining to tattoos in the Army. Hands, face, and neck tattoos are prohibited, as well as too many or too large tattoos (ibid). Similar regulations persist across other branches of service, as well as the common advice to not get tattooed if you are planning to enlist.

Tattoos in the workplace have also shifted greatly. Frequently brought up as a source of concern in recent ethnographies (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Sanders [1989] 2008), not all companies or management are accepting of tattoos and can cause the firing of an employee (regardless of their work value or efficiency). Some businesses have rules pertaining tattoos written into their contracts, whereas others have informal rules against them, catching some newly tattooed employees off guard. As of April 2021, Disney recently amended its employee policies, allowing roughly palm-sized tattoos to be visible on Cast Members now, whereas past policies were strictly against visible tattoos entirely (Dufresne 2021). Hand, neck, and face tattoos are still prohibited at this time.

There has also been changes in how the U.S. Court system has viewed tattooing. In 2010, the Ninth Circuit was the first federal appellate court "to recognize tattooing as expression protected by the First Amendment" (Perzanowski 2017, 109). The case at the time was to remove the ban on tattoo shops in Hermosa Beach, California. Despite being seen as a protected form of expression, "Judge Noonan insisted that the court was 'not bound to recognize any

[37] There is a such thing as 'tattoo bars' too, despite alcohol increasing the difficulty of completing a tattoo (e.g., thinning the blood, affecting the client's motor skills).

special aesthetic, literary, or political value in the tattooist's toil and trade'" (ibid.). Regardless, such a ruling has benefited the tattoo industry overall and may inspire future rulings.

At the same time, legal rulings outside of the United States have an effect within due to the globalized nature of the industry and spread of information over the Internet. In recent news, the United Nations is looking to ban two specific pigments used in tattoo ink, Blue 15:3 and Green 7, by 2023 (Greenfieldboyce 2021; Tattoodo 2021). Such a ban would have drastic effects on the current available color pallet available to tattoo artists. Mario Barth, creator and owner of Intenze Ink estimates that about 65-70% of colors used will suddenly be eliminated since these pigments are used in more than just blue and green inks. Though this does not directly affect the industry in the States now, there are worries that such a ruling will inspire similar bans in North America. Currently, the petition against this ban remains open at the time of writing, thanks to Michl Dirks and Erich Mähnert (Save the Pigments n.d.). Personally, I had heard about the proposed ban before the NPR article thanks to a string of Instagram posts and stories raising awareness across the globe.

On a similar note, as mentioned in previous chapters, there has been a high amount of cross-cultural contact with Japan in relation to tattooing. As of September 2020, tattooing was no longer declared a medical procedure by Japan's Supreme Court because they "require artistic skills different from medicine, and that it cannot be assumed that doctors do the act exclusively" (Kyodo 2020). Due to the use of needles, tattooing was subject to the Medical Practitioners' Act from 1948, necessitating a tattoo artist to hold a medical license in order to practice (Save Tattooing n.d.).

It may seem odd to include this information considering my thesis focuses on North America, but this is a prime example of some of the recent influence from global, cross-cultural

contact between nations in relation to tattooing. The Save Tattooing (in Japan) campaign has English resources, as well as support from tattoo artists in the United States and around the world (Save Tattooing n.d.). A prime example of such support can be shown by the Instagram post by @travelinmicktattoo in the article by HYPEBEAST (Leung 2020). When going through the accounts linked to the image, you come across Japanese, American, Korean, and various European tattoo artists. Like with the proposed UN ink pigment bans, this information reached me the day it was formally announced in person (through various Instagram posts and stories by different individuals), a whole day before (or even later) for some articles to cover such news (Kyodo 2020; Leung 2020; Tattoodo 2021). Such things are important to consider in the future research of tattooing as a whole. It will be difficult to ignore such interactions and how they continue to affect the global tattoo industry going forward, even in a localized context.

Globalization

As frequently mentioned across this thesis, globalization has had a drastic effect on North American tattooing and continues to do so to this day. Now facilitated through the superhighway of information called the Internet, individuals have the ability to make these worldly connections on their own at any time of the day, instead of through selective, controlled sources such as museums or National Geographic magazines. At the same time, the demographic makeup of the United States is deeply varied, containing numerous cultures from indigenous populations to recent immigrants. Even the range of languages practiced within the United States is deeply varied. Tattooing as a practice does not live in a bubble, and never has. A quick review of its history in only a North American context reflects this. Each tattoo artist's personal history,

heritage, and lived experiences all affect how they interact with the industry and outside the industry.

Numerous revival movements of various traditional tattooing practices[38] have taken root in the modern era as a way to reclaim heritage, with more individuals continuing to make connections such as these as they interact online. The Tattoo Renaissance has become such a pivotal point in tattooing because it opened the floodgates of "Anyone can get tattooed." I'm not saying that it is accepted equally across the United States or even something seen in most aspects of public life. But I am saying that the social risks tied to tattoos have greatly decreased comparatively. With the redefinition of the practice into a more acceptable form of self-expression, it has been embraced by a wider range of people who did not feel like other avenues served their needs (at all or as well), regardless of what they intend to express through such practices.

Part of this recent redefinition comes from the exposure to alternative ways of life that previously had low or no exposure in the Western mainstream. With a localized history of deviance and criminality, the socio-cultural uses of tattoos outside of Western society were seen as a way to redefine and reconnect to the body in Western society. Multiple academic studies on Western tattooing have explored how tattoos have played into contemporary ideas of biopower[39]

[38] Examples of such revivals include but are not limited to various Polynesian (e.g., Hawaiian, New Zealand), Indigenous American, Arctic, African, and Japanese (Jomon) tattoo revivals. For recent academic writing reviewing some of these, visit Lars Krutak's website (larskrutak.com). Such revivals are also mentioned across industry interviews and some of the current literature (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Gilbert 2000).

[39] *Biopower* is "the power that lays within the biological condition of life held by an individual [and] it is a power form existing, and rooted deeply, within the social community of that individual" (Garcia-Merritt 2014). Biopower is a useful term when studying the subjugation of bodies and how it is used to control group behaviors.

and identity, often based around the theories of Michel Foucault (Atkinson 2003; Carrere and Peake 2020; DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Rees 2016; Sanders [1989] 2008; Sween 2008; Vail 1999). Especially in postmodern oriented studies, it is acknowledged how these alternative ways of thought have introduced new avenues to reclaim control of the body from various dehumanizing[40] contexts in the modern world (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Roberts 2015; Sween 2008; Vail 1999).

Even when reviewing interviews from various influential tattooers, such as Don Ed Hardy and Filip Leu, the effects of globalization are frequently brought up (Gilbert 2000; Magni 2008). Anything from sharing different techniques and how to replicate specific styles to even just sharing stories across different tattooing industries, the constant flow of information between numerous cultures around the world continues to shape tattooing today and always has. Such interactions haven't been purely a direct line of American to Japanese, Polynesian, or Dutch either. It's more accurate to say that these connections interact closer to a web, spreading out and reaching seemingly unlikely locations such as Australia, Russia, and South America. When even reviewing the materials released by Inked, a New York-based tattoo news company, artists and perspectives from around the globe are constantly featured. A video that perfectly captures some of these sentiments and demonstrates some of these connections is "What Would You Change About the Tattoo Industry? | Tattoo Artists Answer" posted by Inked on August 31, 2018. A wide range of experience, age, and nationalities are encapsulated, touching on many of the topics expressed in this thesis even.

[40] *Dehumanizing* can be defined as "depriving someone of human qualities, personality, or dignity" (Merriam-Webster.com).

In the tattoo industry, technological and stylistic advances continue to occur thanks to this wide reach and has sped up exponentially with the power of the Internet. It is not uncommon for tattoo artists to travels across states or even countries to participate in conventions or guest spots at a shop run by people they already have connections with. Studies specifically looking into the globalized nature of tattooing would be enlightening in understanding possible future changes in the industry, as well as understanding how the globalization of the tattoo industry effects other aspects of daily life. Several books and articles do exist that focus on the global history of tattooing, as separate co-existing entities or as a generalized catch-all, but currently there is little that specifically focuses on the constant networks of influence across the world.

Old School and New School Philosophies

Another aspect of tattooing that has received little coverage in academic studies of tattooing is the acknowledgement of 'new school' and 'old school' philosophies in the industry. One of the closest things has been DeMello's acknowledgement of the division between biker and high-end tattoo magazines, as well as small differences between Baby Boomer and Generation X tattooers (2000). Similarly, Garcia-Merritt mentions first and second generations of tattooers (2014). He places first generation tattoo artists as being born between 1900-1950, practicing tattooing more as a trade than an art, with second generation tattoo artists being born after 1965, approaching tattooing as a professional art form. Unfortunately, these generational divides are not as clear cut and universal across the tattoo industry.

For the sake of clarity, I will provide generalized examples and definitions of new and old school thought[41] in tattooing, but it is important to realize this is yet another aspect of the industry that is not clear-cut. Much like the spectrum of street and high-end shops, many tattoo artists fall into different areas of overlap in such ideals. New and old school thought also does not nicely line up one-to-one with street and high-end shops despite current old schoolers being associated more with street shops and new schoolers being associated more with high-end shops.

As can be surmised from the name, 'old school' relates to a more traditional approach to tattooing. Many of these tattoo artists had to solder their own needles, sanitize by hand, and had to do most of their designing on paper. Some even mixed their own powders into inks, working with a limited pallet. If they needed a reference for a design, they looked at pre-existing flash or had to look through print material. Such artists also faced a higher amount of stigma from the mainstream. Old schoolers are often seen as "rough and tough" and resistant to change in the industry, especially in the form of new technology. Various phrases such as "Bold will hold" and "Loyal to the coil" are also associated with old school tattooing.

Around the Tattoo Renaissance is when 'new school'[42] started to emerge. Being that parts of the industry were still tied to biker gangs and other social outcasts then, early new schoolers could be considered as 'going soft.' Nowadays, new school is mostly associated with embracing technological changes, innovative styles, and the growing, progressive diversity within the industry. Another old school perspective of new school is that "Incoming tattooers have it easy"

[41] To hear about these perspectives from current tattoo artists, look to "Is the Tattoo Industry Divided? | Tattoo Artists React" by Inked on YouTube.
[42] The stylistic genre of New School (or New Skool) also emerged around the same time. Characteristics of the style feature vivid colors and exaggerated proportions. It's reminiscent of cartoons and graffiti designs.

because there's now disposable pre-made sterilized needles, iPads, stencil machines, lightweight cordless tattoo machines, Photoshop and so much more at their disposal. New schoolers are often seen as having an artistic education as well.

Some points of contention between the two schools of thought come down to things that fundamentally change how tattoos are perceived. A prime example is laser. Laser tattoo removal has absolutely dismantled the perceived permanence of a tattoo. An old school manner of tattoos follows that tattoos are for life and you must live with it forever, making the use of laser removal on tattoos as disingenuous and meaningless. It's not uncommon that such thoughts are also tied to the belief that laser has made tattooing 'too accessible.' If someone decides they can no longer handle the social stigma of being tattooed or simply don't like the tattoo anymore, laser treatment can essentially un-do their decision. Given that many individuals strive to stand out from the mainstream through the use of tattoos, such an 'easy cop-out' can be a source of disdain.

On the other side of the coin, more innovative ways to utilize laser treatments for tattoos tends to be embraced by new schoolers. Instead of completely removing a tattoo, a new use of laser has been to *lighten* the existing tattoo so that a newer tattoo can overlap with little obstruction. Cover-ups are common in the tattoo industry for a myriad of reasons. Someone may have gotten a tattoo young, grown to dislike a design they have, or it was poorly done the first time. In the case of collectors, the tattoo may just be in the way of a larger scale project that was not anticipated when first receiving the soon-to-be-removed tattoo. Before laser, if a tattoo featured a lot of dark, heavy colors, there were not a lot of options on how to 'cover' it. There's a decent chance that you'd end up with a larger, darker mess, which would still not be the intended result. By lightening such tattoos with laser, a wider range of options open up, making for a happier customer as well.

Related to the permanence of tattoos, some new styles have been pushed by new schoolers and disdained by old schoolers. Styles such as watercolor or micro tattoos are good examples of common points of contention. Watercolor tattoos are made to look like watercolor painting but on the skin. Because of this, there is very little to no outlining of the tattoos. As the tattoo ages, colors will become more muted and the contrast of the tattoo falls apart. A black outline is frequently used across other styles because it keeps the contrast of the tattoo intact as it ages. This has been learned through the trial and error of old schoolers over the decades, leading to voiced concerns of longevity of watercolor tattoos.

A similar point is made with recently popular micro tattoos. Essentially moving in the reverse direction of large-scale detailed tattoos, micro tattoos push for as much detail as possible in the smallest possible margins. Some have even managed to make readable tattoos down to the size of a nickel. Yet, the key part is that tattoos will *always* age, no matter how good the aftercare is. You cannot store a body away from sunlight and other possible sources of damage like you could with a painting. As the stylistic trend has continued for a few years now, signs of trends in how micro tattoos age become readily available. As per many tattoo artists' predictions, many of these tattoos have become muddled, hard to read shapes of ink.

Relating this back to the different schools of thought, old schoolers have a tendency to stress the longevity of a tattoo and how well it will read over time. Distaste in such tattooing styles commonly comes down to a respect of tattooing as a practice, industry, and art. A belief that creating a 'faulty product' is a disservice to tattooing and other tattooers, because such a bad tattoo reflects back onto the rest of the industry and tattooing as a whole. "Just because you can do it, why should you?" At times, these sorts of differences in the industry can cause a butting of heads.

Despite this, many tattooers are also well aware of the benefits of 'the other side.' A large amount of tattooing still relies on oral history, despite the widespread use of the Internet in the industry. Many old schoolers hold knowledge and stories that have still not been written down or recorded anywhere. Without some of the early norms of the industry engrained by old schoolers, there would be no standards that persist in the current industry. Without the eager curiosity to try new technology by new schoolers, there would be no new stylistic genres, stencil techniques, tattoo machines, inks, and more. Though mentioned as a "divide" in Inked's YouTube video (2020), there is still an implicit understanding that all of these aspects are uniquely a *part* of tattooing and the industry would not be where it is today without either side. As said by Kelly Dotty in the video, "You can't stop the wheel of time. Everything progresses. Everything evolves."

APPLICATION OF THEORY

It is natural for individuals to search for situations and environments where they can feel a sense of belonging and connection to others. A wide range of literature has looked into this and is frequently highlighted across the majority of tattoo-based literature that is currently available (Atkinson 2003; Carrere and Peake 2020; DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Lane 2014; Rees 2016; Roberts 2015; Sanders [1989] 2008; Sween 2008; Vail 1999). One of the most researched topics on tattooing is the motivations of *why* an individual chooses to get tattooed. Multiple categorical catalogues exist now to document the most common motivations and are constantly being revisited (Atkinson 2003; Carrere and Peake 2020; DeMello 2000; Lane 2014; Sanders [1989] 2008). One of the most consistent uses of tattooing across time and space relates to symbolizing group membership. Whether marking insiders or outsiders, tattoos can function as an easily readable text, informing someone about an individual without even making contact. Easy examples of this would be sorority or fraternity tattoos to mark insiders and the historic Japanese use of tattoos to mark criminals as outsiders of acceptable society. Yet, a relatively modern phenomenon is the idea of a 'tattoo community,' a group of people whose connection is built around *having* tattoos, and not *using* tattoos to show membership in other groups.

Looking through academic literature, there is very little exploring the possible social structures behind this idea besides the main resources outlined in the literature review (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Roberts 2015). The most common words used around the social act of tattooing does tend to be subculture and community but does not entirely encapsulate the full scope of interactions surrounding the practice. Though Roberts makes a strong argument for the existence of a postmodern subculture and how fluid membership can be, there is still a focus on individuals only identifying with *one* subculture with no involvement in any others (Atkinson

2003; Roberts 2015). With tattoos being utilized by other groups, it's hard to support such a theory. For example, it's not uncommon for an individual to proudly identify as a biker and *also* actively be involved in separate tattoo-related social activities. This is reflected by the popularity and existence of specifically biker tattoo magazines (DeMello 2000), with quite a bit of overlap with tattoos in biker magazines. Punk and LGBT+ subcultures also intersect with tattooing as a form of expression and connection, while tattooing itself still also affects such individuals' other connections (Carrere and Peake 2020; DeMello 2000; Rees 2016).

At the same time, Roberts' theory does not account for the different levels of involvement between casual consumers, enthusiasts, and collectors. Though his study uses the online forums of ModMagazine.com as a way to connect with "the historians, practitioners and appreciators of body modification" (2015, 1103) as participants, there is a heavy focus on individuals *employed* in the body modification industry. Effectively, this cuts off a vital part of the industry and socialization tied up in tattooing. Such an industry does not exist without customers, and it's bold to base the proposition of a subculture on one side of the body modification industry as if tattoo enthusiasts, collectors, and mainstream clients have no or minimal effect on it. Despite reviewing how the gradual mainstream acceptability of a subculture's style[43] can occur, Roberts' current theory still does not fully explore tattooed individuals that work outside of the body modification industry that are not facing financial hardship or middle-class clientele that do not identify with this overarching group membership but still experience a sense of personal belonging through the use of tattoos.

[43] *Style* is defined by Roberts' as "the manner in which a subculture utilizes symbols to display dissatisfaction with the mainstream culture" (2015, 1099). Such symbols also include "borrowed objects already widely used within the mainstream" (ibid.).

In a past project of mine, DeMello's proposition of an *imagined* tattoo community made the most sense at the time (2000). How else can you explain the common perception of a shared history between individuals who may never meet or individually know of each other, yet are conceptually aware of each other and their supposed connection through being pricked with ink? Another important aspect is that the membership in such a group is self-identified to a degree (Anderson 1983). Despite this, multiple large holes are still left with this theory. With no singular geographic location to gather and no overarching political or theological ideologies, how can such a group have a genuine connection? This becomes even more true when adding the Internet, globalization, and the division of new school and old school thought in these interactions.

DeMello herself is aware of some of the problems with her theory: "I will also argue that it is a contested term that, by itself, does not capture the variation and conflict within the tattoo culture" (ibid., 3) Within the same paragraph, she also notes the numerous overlapping subcommunities within tattooing and warns of unintentionally imposing artificial boundaries where they do not exist. Tattooing is experienced and explored in a myriad of ways through the lived experiences of individuals across the country, not neatly fitting into any clear-cut qualitative categories or definitions. One individual may be a part of multiple subcommunities within and outside of tattooing, whereas someone else may have limited involvement overall. Despite this, both DeMello and Roberts provide information that is useful in exploring Atkinson's theory of a tattoo *figuration*.

Early in Atkinson's chapter exploring the possibility of a subculture or figuration, he warns against the common ideas of tattoo enthusiasts consisting of a "distinct culture, subculture, or community, [because] such depictions are found to be misleading when we examine

enthusiasts' narratives about their tattooing experiences" (2003, 92). Part of understanding individuals' motivations to become tattooed has repeatedly pointed to the emergence of 'tattoo narratives' across contemporary literature (Atkinson 2003; Carrere and Peake 2020; DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Rees 2016; Roberts 2015; Sanders [1989] 2008; Sween 2008). A *tattoo narrative* is essentially the telling of experiences and meanings behind a tattoo and *how* they are told to others. Such narratives frequently involve the 'how' and 'why' behind a specific tattoo or an individual's tattoos overall. It's important to note that multiple studies have noticed that these narratives are told differently depending on various factors (e.g., conservative environment, non-tattooed or anti-tattoo people present, or level of familiarity with the people around) (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Sanders [1989] 2008; Sween 2008).

Tattoo narratives are relatively new, emerging alongside the many other changes from the Renaissance. Traditional American tattoos were quite literal with specific designs and placements having consistent meanings among sailors and military men (DeMello 2000, 63-65). Vow tattoos are an additional form of literal tattoos, with partners' names or "Mom" tattooed to show the owner's devotion to that person. With tribal and more stylistic tattoos emerging, tattoos started to need their own explanations to be understood, instead of being a recognizable piece selected from a common collection of readable images with consistent meanings. As explored by Vail in relation to tattoo collectors (1999), individuals learn how to build their connections *from* other people, and similarly learn how to tell their tattoo narratives through interacting with others (Garcia-Merritt 2014; Sanders [1989] 2008; Sween 2008). Multiple researchers note getting tattooed as a negotiated act or process, constantly receiving feedback from tattooed and non-tattooed people on what is acceptable or not (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Garcia-Merritt

2014; Sween 2008). Examples would include ‘acceptable’ reasons to get tattooed, as well as what is seen as acceptable placements in relation to how visible the location is.

By learning these norms through interaction, various ways to legitimize an otherwise ‘unacceptable’ tattoo can be discovered and explained through adjusted narratives. As an example, let’s say that someone got a tattoo of a Naruto character on their upper arm. They might legitimize this tattoo to their parents or family by saying that it reminds them of being a kid or of a family member that may have passed. To friends and some strangers, they might rationalize their tattoo by saying that they relate to this specific character’s personality or struggles. That tattoo can still even be explained as “Well, I liked it and it looked cool, so why not?” One of these explanations is not “more” correct or genuine than the other, but the specific narrative told is different depending on the audience to ensure a smooth interaction with as little negative feedback as possible. In some scenarios negative feedback may be inevitable, such as with a boss that is not a fan of *any* tattoos, but the intensity of the feedback can be decreased depending on how the tattoo narrative is told (or not told at all). By highlighting that the location chosen allows the tattoo to be hidden by most uniforms or stressing the familial link, the negative response from the begrudging boss can be managed. Even information on the most effective ways to hide tattoos is shared along these important lines of connections and communication among tattooed people (Atkinson 2003; Garcia-Merritt 2014; Sween 2008).

As pointed out by Atkinson (2003), Sanders ([1989] 2008), and Sween (2008), a common point of introduction to tattoos is the positive exposure brought on by tattooed people in someone’s life (e.g., co-workers, friends, family members). This is another point of socialization that plays an integral role in tattooing. This interconnected web of people continually highlights the dependencies of individuals within and outside of the tattoo industry, reflected in the ongoing

outward spread of information. A single person can only get tattooed so much, up to the point where they genuinely run out of available skin[44]. Repeat clients are still beneficial to tattoo artists because there is a higher likelihood of continued positive interactions. These beneficial interactions and experiences are shared with non-tattooed friends, who still have available skin, and may encourage them to become tattooed intentionally or unintentionally. This benefits not only the recommended tattoo artist, but also benefits incoming clients by having the artist vouched for by individuals who have already had positive interactions with them (Atkinson 2003; Sanders [1989] 2008).

Also noted across some of the current literature is the perceived connection between tattooed individuals when meeting for the first time or even in passing (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Sanders [1989] 2008; Sween 2008). Sween even draws the term "tattoo bond" from one of her participants' interviews, highlighting that "individuals often liked to share their tattoo stories with other individuals who also had tattoos" (2008, 58). Some individuals purposely show their tattoos in some scenarios to purposely open conversations about them and to possibly receive positive feedback from other tattooed people (Atkinson 2003; Sanders [1989] 2008; Sween 2008). Some tattoo narratives even highlight this sort of interaction and the enjoyment of finding fellows that have a similar understanding and enjoyment of tattoos. Atkinson even posits that some individuals take it upon themselves to become advocates for tattooing by openly pursuing conversations on it in their daily lives as a way to help decrease the stigma and bring to attention the positive attributes of the practice (2003). Such information continues to spread outwards and

[44] This still applies to *blast over* tattoos (black ink tattoos that purposely overlap or cover pre-existing tattoos). There does reach a point where the situation just becomes more black ink on top of pre-existing black tattoos, but this too is being pushed with white ink tattoos on top of blast overs.

has a slow domino effect on others' perceptions on tattooing, without even directly speaking to a tattooed person sometimes.

The dissemination of information across these webs of interdependence also reflects through the norms of the tattoo industry. Chiefly, this shows in the near absence of pursuing copyright law in the industry, as well as practically uniform practices around flash (Perzanowski 2017). The majority of tattoo copyright suits have been essentially the tattoo artist against a third party, such as larger companies using a famous client's tattoo outside of what is seen as acceptable use because the design has been disconnected from the tattooed client's body (e.g., Mike Tyson's tattoo recreated in *The Hangover II*, recreation of athletes' tattoos in the games *UFC Undisputed 3* and *NBA 2K16*) (ibid.). Despite blatant and close copying of custom designs becoming a growing problem in the tattoo industry (especially with the popularity of the Internet), there is a minimal amount of legal action to compact this. The main avenues taken to handle such copying involve inaction, direct communication with the perpetrator, and negative gossip (which is the primary technique). This too reflects how important the connections between individuals in the tattoo figuration are because negative gossip can deeply affect the tattooer's client flow, as well as affecting any possible upward mobility in the industry.

In the manner of tattoo flash, Lew "the Jew" Alberts is known for popularizing these sheets but did not include an end user license agreement with them (ibid.). Over time, the "proper" uses of flash were normalized and continue to maintain these unspoken rules even to today. More modern flash sometimes has these same rules written with them now, to ensure there is no misuse in this rapidly expanding industry as less apprenticeships are pursued in a traditional manner. To summarize, only minor alterations can be done to purchased flash (such as changing names in the design or color schemes). Unacceptable uses would include passing off

purchased flash as your own or printing said flash on merchandise, such as shirts or stickers. The scenario is different when the original creator of the flash is making merchandise of it or doing more intense changes to the designs. It does still occur to a lesser degree now, but these rules have been handed down and understood through the daily goings of the tattoo industry and learned first-hand in an apprenticeship setting (ibid.).

Interviews with some legendary status tattooers even reflect the deeply complicated but highly beneficial networks of connections in and around the tattoo industry (Gilbert 2000; Magni 2018). When reading through Don Ed Hardy's interview in Gilbert's tattoo history book (2000), there is frequent mention of the back-and-forth exchange of techniques and ideas across people and countries. For example, his frequent contact with Japanese tattoo masters and constant intellectual collaboration with other greats, like Leo Zulueta and Cliff Raven. Similar sentiments and connections are expressed in the interview with Filip Leu (Magni 2018). Tattooing has always maintained its oral history roots and continues to even in the digital age. One of the many ways it continues to live on is through the vast web of interdependencies of individuals in the tattoo figuration, allowing this information to continue to live on through more and more people. Even in a North American context, it is difficult to argue *against* any effect the rest of the world has had on tattooing and continues to have.

With gathering sites expanding from beyond just physical tattoo shops, and into conventions, print media, and numerous online outlets, the vast web of connections and variance between the personal experiences in tattooing continues to grow and evade existing definitions of subculture or community. At the same time, a tattoo figuration also accounts for *all* experiences related to tattooing, regardless of whether an individual is a casual consumer, enthusiast, collector, tattoo artist or even an aspiring apprentice.

Reflecting back on an early hypothesis I had in past projects, I took on the assumption then of a tattoo community solely based around the industry with the involvement of some honorary members. Such honorary members included individuals who may not have a direct hand in the industry, like machine builders and tattoo artists actively do, but still had a notable effect on the industry, such as collectors or outspoken individuals recognized for advocating for growing positive perceptions on tattooing. Problems with this hypothesis were reflected in how it did not account for people "outside" of the industry, but still actively partook as consumers of it. Tattoo conventions, T.V. shows, and magazines tend to fall flat if they are geared towards *only* tattoo artists or the larger body modification industry. The audience is much smaller in comparison to those getting tattooed, who are not part of the industry, as well as individuals who are not tattooed but are curious. At the same time, my basis for this hypothesis was built off of DeMello's (2000) *imagined* community, which does not have the clearest definition behind it as well.

When finally coming across Atkinson's (2003) tattoo *figuration*, holes in my earlier hypothesis were finally filled and accounted for. Even looking at the mass amount of media geared towards the mainstream that involves tattoos, it is hard to overlook them as a material when studying tattoos to any degree. At times, it may seem as if a subculture or community could make more sense when scraping the surface, but it is bold to assume that non-tattooed people have no effect on the social interactions on the individual and industry level of tattooing. Take into account the academic history of tattooing, proclaiming the Western practice of it as a sign of personal failing and moral weakness. When viewing the legal history of tattooing, with it frequently being declared entirely illegal in many states, how can it be said that these "external" actions have limited effect on the web of interdependencies in the tattoo figuration? Tattooing

has, and likely never will, exist in a vacuum with only one sole source controlling everything. With these things in mind, I posit that at this current point in time, the most recent scope of Western tattooing, specifically in North America, more closely fit's Atkinson's (2003) proposition of a tattoo figuration, in comparison to other proposed theories.

CONCLUSION

The nature and trajectory of the tattoo industry in North America continues to shift, as well as the global connections behind it. Trends will continue to come and go, as well as the technology supporting it continually advancing forward. Despite this, much of the spirit behind it continues on just the same. This thesis specifically focuses on attempting to quantify the possible social configuration surrounding the industry and its consumers, but also attempts to open avenues of new research topics that have received little visibility to date or needs further updating.

At this current point in time, Atkinson's (2003) proposition of a tattoo figuration is the most fitting given the interconnected nature of social actors inside and outside of the tattoo industry. It is important to remember that regardless of the level of involvement, all clientele does still have an effect on the industry and tattoo artists on an individual level. With the growing effects of globalization and the Internet, the flow of information becomes a complicated and multi-layered web when attempted to be broken down. Such a construct also takes into account the effect of experiences outside of tattooing as having a role in how and why someone becomes involved in the practice.

Due to the frequently shifting nature of the industry, the inclusion of other possible social constructs (DeMello 2000; Roberts 2015) and a current snapshot of the industry allows for possible future research to have a prospective stable starting point, as well as a point of reference in comparison to any unanticipated future changes in the industry or overall acceptability of tattooing in the North American mainstream. At the same time, this thesis makes an active effort to move away from the academic standard of viewing tattooing as criminal or psychopathological and is instead a yet another avenue of expressing culture in a postmodern

world. Though tattooing may continue to be difficult to define across current definitions in various academic disciplines, it is important to remember the interaction of individuals is key to understanding its spread, popularity, and 'meaning.' By simplifying the practice into grand schemes and movements, common yet diverse key experiences on an independent level are overlooked and removes some of the personal power tattooing grants people, as well as its affiliative ability on a localized scale.

Regardless of tattooing's mixed perceptions in the mainstream and academia, I have no doubt that it will remain a popular topic for many years to come. Even if it falls to the wayside, there is no doubt that aspects of it will still persevere, given its survival through the near entire span of human existence.

REFLECTIONS

Though not a necessity for this project, I felt it necessary to have a space to include any thoughts that did not fit into the rest of the scope of my project and given inspiration from some of the work before me (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Sanders [1989] 2008). At the beginning of my research, I knew that it would be impossible to please every prospective reader, as well as getting everything perfectly correct, especially within such a limited timeframe. Especially on sections addressing things such as old and new school philosophy and the semantics between being *tattooed* and *having* tattoos, broad generalizations were necessary to create a starting point for future work on these topics and to familiarize readers that may be unfamiliar with such ideas. I am aware that some of these generalizations are almost too broad for individuals familiar with tattoos, as well as glossing over how much overlap occurs between these kinds of divisions. Hopefully in future work of my own or other inspired researchers can further the study on such topics.

Frequently when working on my thesis, I'd be stuck in a back and forth of "Is this research necessary? Is there even a need to know if there's a tattoo community or not? Everyone just uses subculture and community already, so what's the point?" I'm certain other researchers have similar internal conflicts with other topics, yet remain continually driven by their internal curiosity to know for themselves. I have ended up asking just about everyone around me at some point or another in passing, "Do you think there's a tattoo community?" There was almost a resounding response of agreement in the existence of one in my day-to-day life. There would even be times where I would get dumbfounded looks as if I asked if the sky wasn't blue. Yet, I'd find conflicting arguments and ideas in a large amount of academic research that I could get my hands on. I couldn't quite figure out where or how this rift in beliefs occurred.

Understandably, there is a history of the tattoo industry and tattooed people being treated poorly or as outcasts on the fringes of society. Information was protected through the use of oral histories that were only shared with a select few, and sometimes the trust earned by a researcher or journalist would be lost due to the spinning of truths into sensationalized pieces by inflating or twisting small facts (or even straight up fabrication) into something the mainstream would latch onto. The curiosity around tattoos from an outsider's perspective would benefit the researcher's or journalist's career, yet continued to be at the detriment of the social perception of tattooing itself. With this in mind, I can only wonder if the guarded nature of the tattoo industry has led more traditional research methods on the topic to run astray from the current scope of tattooing by focusing on old biases and methods of study without taking into account the historic and current misuse of information. I'm not saying all current research or mainstream print has followed this path, but there is certainly a trend that may have contributed to the gap in perspectives between academic research and lived experiences.

At the same time, academic research on tattooing is frequently difficult or completely inaccessible to the public. As mentioned earlier in my thesis, there were times where it was even difficult for me as a university student to find specific articles, despite having the *exact* citations referencing them in front of me. Not all individuals are familiar with how to use a database, let alone have access to them. Part of my choice to have my Honors Undergraduate Thesis set to open source immediately is to at least put forward my contribution in making this information more available and to hopefully encourage a more transparent conversation between the tattoo industry and academia in the future.

Personally, I do not feel like I can portray North American tattooing, or tattooing in general, in its most comprehensive and complete state possible without dedicating a master's or

Ph.D. thesis to it (or even more). With so many local histories still being documented, increasing technological advances, and so many unique lived experiences of tattooed individuals across the United States alone, it is impossible to fully capture the vibrant, determined spirit of this practice in just this one modest thesis of an Undergraduate student. Ever since my first professional tattoo in 2018 (with non-professional ones before it), I continue to encounter so many unique tattooed individuals that reflect some of my own experiences in even some of the small talk we've shared in passing or time spent in tattoo shops together. I would remember small, shared moments as I continued to write, like similar introductory stories, "It seemed like the thing to do." Including small moments between classes. There was a day where I was talking with a classmate as we crossed campus, and he shared his surprise about how his newest piece "felt like it had always been there."

As I continue to get tattooed more and more, I have no doubt the academic and mainstream interest in tattooing will not diminish. Yet as many publications before me, it is difficult to predict the future of tattooing overall. It may continue to grow at breakneck speeds, with each new generation constantly surpassing the technical skill of the last. The popularity may suddenly diminish and follow a similar trajectory as it did in the 'dark ages' in the 1950s and 1960s. Regardless of what the future may hold, I have no doubt that there will still be individuals who cherish it deeply and the bonds that it gives them.

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